



DIVISION OF HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICES

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Community Health Services
Disease Prevention
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CHOLERA Fact Sheet

Office of Disease Prevention

(605) 773-3737

1-800-592-1861 in South Dakota only

This material is provided for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical care. We are not able to answer personal medical questions. Please see your health care provider concerning appropriate care, treatment or other medical advice.

What is cholera?

Cholera is a bacterial disease that affects the intestinal tract. It is caused by a germ called *Vibrio cholerae*. Although cholera is a very rare disease today, six worldwide outbreaks were documented between 1817 and 1911 that resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. Currently, only a few cases are recognized in the United States each year.

Who gets cholera?

While cholera is a rare disease, those who may be at risk include people traveling to foreign countries where outbreaks are occurring and people who consume raw or undercooked seafood from warm coastal waters subject to sewage contamination. In both instances, the risk is quite small.

How is the germ spread?

The cholera germ is passed in the stools. It is spread by eating or drinking food or water contaminated by the fecal waste of an infected person. This occurs more often in underdeveloped countries lacking adequate water supplies and proper sewage disposal.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

People exposed to cholera may experience mild to severe diarrhea, vomiting and dehydration. Fever is usually absent.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear from six hours to five days after exposure.

What is the treatment for cholera?

Because of the rapid dehydration that may result from severe diarrhea, replacement of fluids by mouth or by the intravenous route is critical. Antibiotics, such as tetracycline, are also used to shorten the duration of diarrhea and shedding of the germs in the feces.

Is there a vaccine for cholera?

A vaccine is available and is sometimes recommended for travelers to certain foreign countries where cholera is occurring. However, the vaccine offers only partial protection (50%) for a short duration (two to six months). Some physicians feel that foreign travelers almost never contract cholera and that use of the current vaccine cannot be justified.

How can cholera be prevented?

The single most important measure is to avoid consuming foods or water in foreign countries where cholera occurs unless they are known to be safe or have been properly treated.

Should an infected person be excluded from work?

Persons excreting cholera organisms should not work as food handlers until recovery of clinical illness and until two fecal specimens collected at intervals of at least 24 hours have been cultured negative. If an antibiotic has been given, the initial culture should be taken 48 hours after the last dose.